



GIRLS ACTIVATOR CASE STUDY

OVERVIEW

Rugby's approach to recruitment of young people has been through the Small Blacks Development Model. Small Blacks rugby caters for 5 to 12-year-olds and has traditionally seen young people start at five years old and move through age bands and skill progression in a linear manner. However, the linear nature of the Small Blacks model has been challenged in its ability to recruit and retain players entering the game at different ages and stages, and this is amplified for girls. By way of example, circa 50% of 13 to 15-year-old girls registered in rugby in any one year are new to the game but enter at a stage where there is no consideration of their learning needs, leading to a suboptimal experience, increased risk of injury and decreased levels of retention.

In response to poor retention, the Girls Activator Programme commenced in 2022 and was able to leverage the success and visibility of the 2021 Women's Rugby World Cup. The programme was launched in 14 National Provincial Championship (NPC) Unions to develop new ways for girls to engage in rugby without having to commit to the formal club or school systems that are often season-long.

A key enabler of the programme was to build a network of 'Girls Activators' across the country. The Girls Activators, under the guidance of their Provincial Union, develop, deliver and lead an alternative approach for girls to enter rugby, in a range of different local environments such as schools, community groups, churches as well as through clubs.

What are we trying to achieve?

- A growth in the variety of opportunities to sample and play rugby in girls-only environments.
- A growth in the number of girls interested in engaging with and playing rugby.
- More introductory offerings for girls that are well connected to sustainable school and club offerings.
- Development of the rugby workforce in delivering quality rugby experiences for girls and women.
- A safer game.

ENGAGEMENTS FOR 2022

82,184

BY REGION:

NORTHERN

48,970

CENTRAL

17,762

SOUTH ISLAND

15,452

ENGAGEMENTS FOR 2023

156,833

BY REGION:

NORTHERN

94,626

CENTRAL

32,509

SOUTH ISLAND

29,698

AT A GLANCE

Girls and women playing the game reached an all-time high in 2019 with 31,000 participants across clubs and schools. Circa 50% of this participation was, however, through one-off tournaments and festivals with low conversion to formal playing systems.

Due to the visibility of the Women's Rugby World Cup, and the collaborative efforts across the rugby system we are now seeing a shift in participation. In 2023, NZR reported 29,500 Girls and Women playing the game with a significant increase in those playing in more formal season-length offerings in clubs and schools. In 2023, 22,177 girls and women were playing in regular winter season-length competitions for their club or school, a rise of 48% on 2019 numbers.

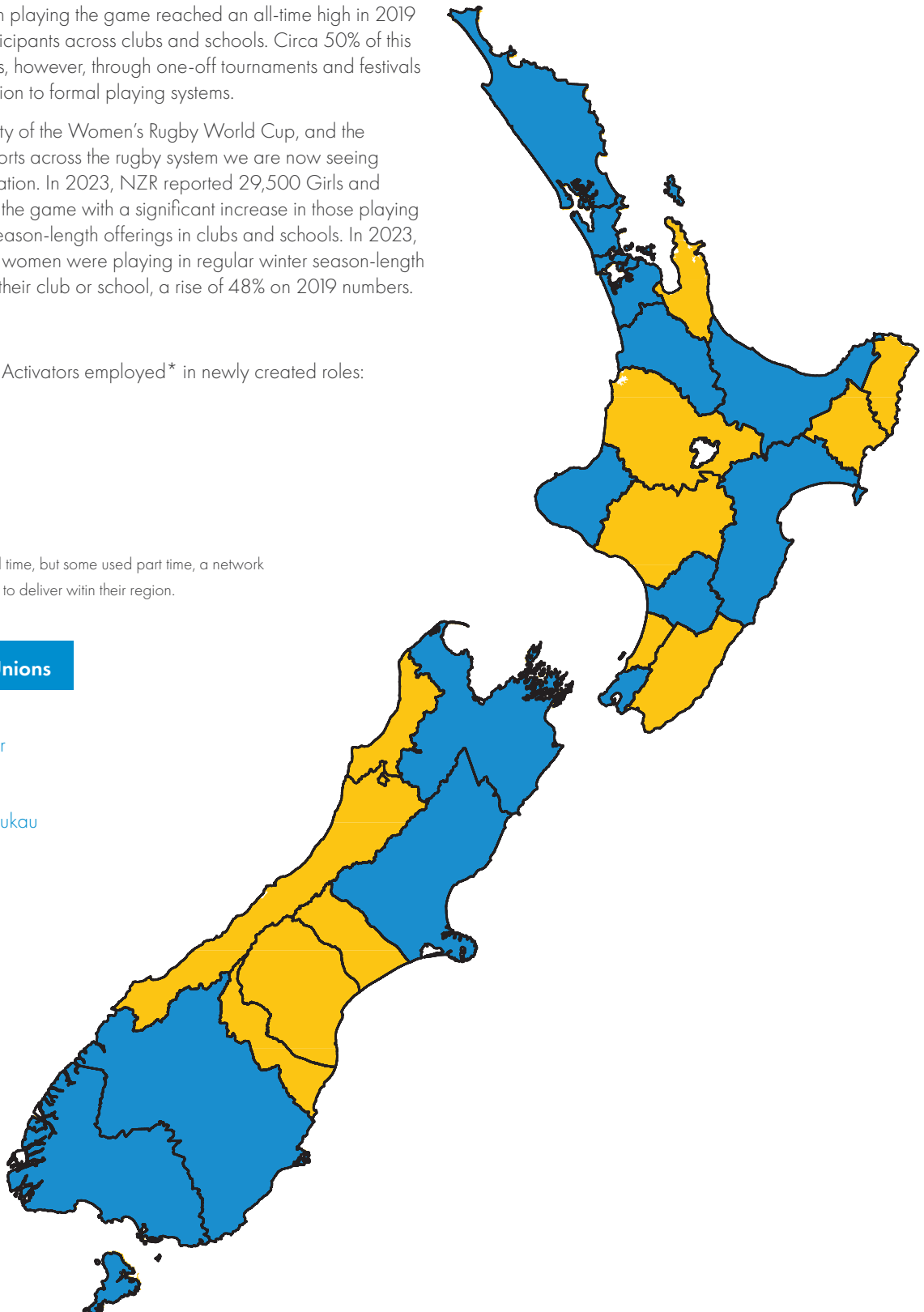
Number of Girls Activators employed* in newly created roles:

- Central (2)
- Wellington (6)
- Northern (17)
- Southland (5)

*Most roles were full time, but some used part time, a network or casual contracts to deliver within their region.

Participating Unions

- Northland
- North Harbour
- Auckland
- Counties Manukau
- Waikato
- Bay of Plenty
- Taranaki
- Hawkes Bay
- Manawatu
- Wellington
- Tasman
- Canterbury
- Otago
- Southland



IMPACT STORY

NORTHLAND RUGBY UNION

Motivated by being one of two Provincial Unions to host the Women's Rugby World Cup 2021 (played in 2022), Northland Rugby Union (NRU) utilised Girls Activator Funding to leverage the excitement and increased visibility of women's rugby through increasing and enhancing the opportunities available for girls to participate in rugby across the Northland region.

“First and foremost, Northland Rugby Union is incredibly grateful for the financial assistance to enable the Girls Activator Programme within our province. Ka pai! From a Northland perspective, the programme was a success and enabled the focus to deliver not only Rippa opportunities that grew the base of female players, but also sent a clear message to parents and caregivers that we were seriously focused on growing the girl's game. You had to see the joy and satisfaction of athletes running with the ball in hand in space for the first time in their lives, this too was matched by the supporters on the sidelines. To see their daughter, granddaughter or niece run freely was something they could not see in netball or hockey and with a smile on their face! A light has been turned on that will not go out.

Hannah Shalders who led our program, has a unique ability to run professional, fun laden events that attract and inspire budding athletes, this supported with a passion for our game and Northland is what delivered this success.”

Cameron Bell, NRU CEO



**ENGAGEMENTS
FOR 2022**

7,744

**ENGAGEMENTS
FOR 2023**

7,983

**TOTAL
ENGAGEMENTS**

15,727

8

**NEW GIRL'S TEAMS
YEAR 3/4 RIPPA
TOURNAMENTS**

20

**NEW GIRL'S TEAMS
YEAR 5/6 RIPPA
TOURNAMENTS**

18

**NEW GIRL'S TEAMS
YEAR 7/8 RIPPA
TOURNAMENTS**

19

**NEW GIRL'S ONLY
CLUB RIPPA TEAMS**

GIRLS ACTIVATOR IMPLEMENTATION JOURNEY



1. Recruit a Girls Activator

This funding allowed NRU to turn one existing primary school delivery role that stretched across the entire region into two roles (North Zone & South Zone) to activate within their primary schools with a more targeted girls focus.

2. Connect with Primary and Intermediate schools

NRU connected with schools through their relationships with clubs and sub unions, the Girls Activator Leads delivered musters within the clubs and then worked with each school to direct them to those musters via school-based sessions. NRU, sub unions, and clubs worked collaboratively to introduce rugby to the girls. Students were then introduced to rugby through a range of options such as lunchtime sessions, in-class sessions, girls-only sessions, and mixed-gender sessions. The school sessions were initially 45 minutes in 3-4 week blocks, however, once the clubs were engaged and girls' teams were established, the sessions moved to being more club-based. Each session utilised a 'games-based' learning approach to keep a focus on progression, fun, and building connections - all followed by playing Rippa Rugby.

3. Provide ongoing opportunities to learn and play

Post-school sessions, the participants were invited to girls-only Rippa modules at local clubs. The Rippa modules were promoted at the school sessions, via social media and the school databases, connecting the girls with their local club opportunities. The delivery in schools was used to promote the upcoming Rippa modules which run for six weeks on Fridays after school.

4. Offer Girls Only Rippa Grades and Tackle Sessions

Before The Activator Programme, NRU offered mixed-grade events with a minimum of two girls per team. Since launching the Activator Programme, NRU identified a need for girls-only opportunities to play. The union trialled a Girls Only Rippa grade, that has now continued with success seeing over 200 girls regularly attend Wednesday nights Rippa Rugby for the 6-week initiative.

LEARNINGS

- Schools can be great partners to work with as there is opportunity to co-design approaches with them and their students around programmes that are mutually beneficial. In many cases, the Unions are well known to the Schools and can leverage off their relationships with them.
- It is important for NRU to have the role split into two as the Northland geographic is big to cover. Splitting it into North and South allows more coverage and connection with the community.
- Connecting a school with a club close by worked well, these players are now associated with a club they can continue through the grades with.
- There is a need to have more of a structure or programme in place, so schools book returning visits and have progressive options for those who want to continue playing & learning at school.

IMPACT STORY

MARIST EASTERN RUGBY CLUB

Through Auckland Rugby Union (ARU) Girls Activator funding, in 2022 Marist Eastern Rugby Club embraced the opportunity to provide opportunities for girls to try rugby in schools local to the club. The connection with schools allowed the club to introduce rugby to local girls, they supported the girls to build confidence and grow a love for the game, the sessions were followed by the promotion of ongoing playing opportunities back at the club. The Girls Activator Programme resulted in a 22% increase in girls' registrations at Marist Eastern Rugby Club from 2022 to 2023.

“**Biggest success of the programme has been Marist Eastern Rugby Club. They bought into the programme and ran with it to the point where they are having to turn schools down as they didn't have enough time to be in every school. The reason Marist Eastern were successful is they had the right people running the program and fully embraced the opportunity. Because of the funding, they were able to hire extra coaches that would go with Marist Eastern Community Rugby Manager into schools and assist in the delivery.**”

Anna Peterson, ARU Game Development Manager



ENGAGEMENTS

2,549

**SCHOOLS
ENGAGED**

5

22%

**INCREASE IN
GIRLS CLUB
REGISTRATIONS**

3

**NEW GIRL'S ONLY
TEAMS INTRODUCED**

GIRLS ACTIVATOR IMPLEMENTATION JOURNEY



1. Engaging with 'Have a Go' Activations

Targeting 5 to 15-year-old girls the club began delivering 'have a go' experiences at their local schools at Baverstock Oaks School, Dawson School, Sancta Maria Catholic Primary School, Mission Heights Primary, and Mission Heights Junior College. The sessions were during school time and an hour long, all sessions prioritised fun, game-based learning.

2. Connect participants to the club

The new relationships with schools allowed Marist Eastern Rugby Club to leverage the momentum of the in-school activator programme and invite the participants to initiatives at the club. The invitation included participation in further sessions at the club while also encouraging them to join a team to play outside of school hours. At the start of 2023, the club increased its female participation by 20% and established three new girls-only teams.

3. Consistency

Marist Eastern provided the most consistent programme providing full-term or full-year offerings for each school. When the weather was not favourable, they went inside the classroom and continued to work on a theory-based curriculum working on; Finding their identity, building confidence, rugby laws, and knowledge of concussions. Marist Eastern used resources from E Tū Tāngata and Careers NZ.



LEARNINGS

- The most important part of an activation is what follows if the girls enjoyed the experience and wish to continue to experience rugby. That's where the club connection is crucial in providing that next experience, and increased in junior girls playing at Marist Eastern.
- Hiring the 'right' people to lead activations is crucial to the success of an initiative.
- This program has also encouraged Marist Eastern to explore other ways to make their club more inclusive. They are doing this by engaging with different community groups who traditionally wouldn't engage with their club such as Disability Sport Auckland.

IMPACT STORY

FUTURE CYCLONES

Future Cyclones girls' rugby programme is a confidence and games-based learning initiative delivered by the Manawatū Rugby Union Girls Activators.

Targeting girls aged between 7-13 at all skill levels, the programme runs in six week blocks in terms one and two each year. The programme promotes confidence, friendships, fun, and progression through a range of games. This looks like a rotation of game stations that cover catching, passing, tackling, kicking, and falling.

Petra Fell (age 13) and Macy Cameron (age 12) are two participants in the Future Cyclones Programme.



Petra and Macy love playing rugby and tell us they are inspired by the Black Ferns, however, what do they enjoy the most? Being with friends!



PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: PETRA FELL & MACY CAMERON

Have you played Rugby before?

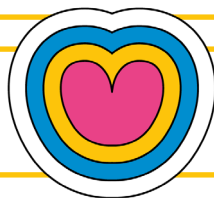
Yes, we have we now play rugby for the local Hinetoa girl's team. We have also been to the Future Cyclone programmes lots before and we love it.

Why did you come to the programme?

We wanted to learn more skills and knowledge of the game but mainly because my friends are also in the programme, we get to have lots of fun and learn together.

Why do you love rugby?

Because it is fun, and we can run it straight.



What did you like the most?

Playing lots of fun games and because I get to do it with my friends and we are all girls.

What skills did you like the most?

I liked learning how to tackle and the drills Kahu taught us. I got heaps better at tackling.



Favourite part?

Being with my friends and everything about the programme – Kahu and Irene are awesome!
We also enjoy playing rugby mostly because we are on the same team as our friends, and it is fun as.

Will you do it again?

Yes, we will if we can. We have been to them every time they run the program.

IMPACT STORY

CANTERBURY RUGBY UNION

A key component of the Activator Programme is to develop a network of nationwide 'Girls Activators' that develop, deliver, and lead an alternative approach for girls to enter rugby.

In 2021, the Canterbury Rugby Football Union (CRFU) enhanced its focus on fostering growth, engagement, and opportunities for young wāhine in both contact and non-contact variations of rugby, and to achieve this, they recruited Jorja Simpson to assist the Girls Activator Programme for the Union.

CRFU took a co-design approach with schools to design the activator programme which led to the implementation of four modules delivered in each school. The focus was on making these sessions fun and engaging for participants of all ages and giving the young girls confidence & competence with rugby. After visiting the schools, the activator would further connect the girls with local clubs that were supported by the union to run after-school sessions.

Jorja Simpson, a standout activator, played a crucial role in leading sessions, adapting them to be enjoyable for participants of all ages. Being part of the activator program supported Jorja's journey in rugby as she developed from a dedicated activator to a manager for the Canterbury U18 girls' team and an internship with Matatū in 2024, reflecting the positive influence she had on the CRFU Activator Programme and the wider rugby community.

LEARNINGS

- The opportunity to develop and grow females in the workforce has been successful. It wasn't something that was the focus to start with. Still, the journey of Jorja showcased how the Activator Programme not only contributed to the growth of girls' rugby on the grass but also served as a platform for leadership development and opportunity to get more women and girls into the workforce.
- Have a programme/session that can progress and regress easily depending on the audience.
- Contacting schools in preseason (term before, year before) to lock sessions in early and having the right connection to the right people in the schools can build relationships making it easier to book in sessions with the school.
- Activators are mainly university students which worked well for them as they were available to do different hours throughout the day.
- It's hard to get access to the right people in schools to respond/set up sessions.



ACTIVATIONS

226

ENGAGEMENTS FOR 2022

8,655

ENGAGEMENTS FOR 2023

11,808

48

SCHOOLS WITH ACTIVATOR PROGRAMME

34

COMMUNITY EVENTS DELIVERED

6

TEAMS IN THE NEW GIRLS ONLY GRADE YEARS 4, 5, 6

2

NEW GIRLS ONLY TEAMS YEARS 7, 8

ACTIVATOR EXPERIENCE: JORJA SIMPSON



How did you get into being an activator and why?

I had expressed interest to a few different people at CRFU about wanting to be involved with something in rugby and the Canterbury rugby community and then received a call from the Women's Rugby Development Officer who was looking for activators at the beginning of the year. I took the opportunity because I can coach and teach the game, teach kids new and old to the sport, while also being able to use the opportunity for one of my papers at university as my practicum.

Do you want to continue to work in rugby going forward (full-time or volunteer)?

Most definitely. Studying towards working in rugby or another high-performance sport is the end goal. Having the opportunities with Canterbury Rugby this year has opened my eyes to the many different opportunities that there are within a high-performance sporting organisation and this is for sure something that I want to continue with in the future. I have been offered an internship opportunity with Matatū for 2024 which I am hoping will help me post university studies.

What learnings have you had during your time as an activator?

Working with different groups of kids all the time has its challenges. Learning to adapt to the different ways of coaching for different groups and what works best for them would have to be a big learning for me. Also learning about all the different opportunities for kids within the region that Canterbury Rugby offer was also a big learning for me as there are endless opportunities for kids to be involved and for activators to help.

What did you like about the activator programme?

Being able to go in and coach a range of different kids in schools across the Canterbury region was awesome. Showing the game to those who may not have had the chance to experience it and then also giving them the opportunity to be involved in the game was so cool. Another thing would have to be seeing the kids' faces light up when they had a session and knowing that they were enjoying it was another big thing.

What was your experience as a manager for the Canterbury U-18 team like?

I think it helped me decide if I wanted to work in the industry. Having the guide of others who have experience with managing teams was helpful as this was quite new to me. The coaches were supportive in guiding game days and being able to help with the development of the girls was cool to do.

Was it satisfying seeing young girls come along to sessions and then sign up to play?

Being able to coach and teach the game to young girls who hadn't played before and then seeing them at the different sessions and competition days was cool. There was no pathway for me like this at their age with it being strictly a girl-only competition. Being able to see them play the game and love it is so much shows where women's rugby and the pathway is heading.

Anything else you want to add from your experiences?

Being able to be involved in NPC and Farah Palmer Cup presented by Bunnings Warehouse game days was something that came from being an activator. I was able to see the different parts that go into a game day.

IMPACT STORY

ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

The uniqueness and flexibility of the activator programme allowed for activators to modify sessions to suit the participants and their specific needs. As part of the characteristic required for each Provincial Union, NZR strongly encouraged Provincial Unions to think outside the square and consider providing the opportunity to groups that wouldn't usually pick rugby or rippa as a viable option, or who wouldn't traditionally participate in rugby.

The activator and support group at Manawatū intentionally reached out to all schools within the region that hadn't had any form of rugby within the school or a local competition.

One religion-based school, through the activator programme went from having no girls participate in any form of contact sport to allowing and providing girls the opportunity to learn new skills and be exposed to the game of rugby in a way, suiting their needs and wants within their specific boundaries respectively.

Implementation

Manawatū Rugby Union's Women and Girls Activator teamed up with the Women's Regional Development Officer and Hurricanes Pua player Kahurangi, and delivered a series of game-based sessions within the school to a group of Year 11-13 PE Classes over a period of time.

The sessions started with simple non-contact games and warm-up activities, slowly introducing ball skills and invasion/decision making to successfully progress to confidence around body position through simple wrestling games.



“The students were appreciative of new faces presenting new drills and ideas to them. The energy that you, Kahurangi, and Ryan brought encouraged the students to respond well and actively engage in the classes that you took.”

“Your introduction of the Rippa rules into games was clear and concise and these rules were reinforced over the consecutive weeks that you took the students both during drills and in games played.”

“I appreciated observing how you ran sessions as it was valuable Professional Development on how my own Physical Education classes could be improved and new activities and drills that I could incorporate into them. I also found your clarification of Rippa rules invaluable.”

REACH AND IMPACT

Because of the non-traditional and flexible approach to the game and the specific modifications made to the skills it became a more appealing opportunity and helped foster and build a relationship with a school that wouldn't traditionally see sport or rugby as a viable option for their school.

Allowed the girls to participate in physical activity through game-based learning methods who have not had the opportunity to do so, in a safe controlled fun environment that is respectful of religion.

The sessions were delivered through games-based learning. The activators were able to apply their personal development skills provided by NZR and external resources (Kyle Mclean) in developing specific games for understanding to enhance both the growth of the activators and the young people involved.



“ As you were representing Manawatū Rugby the students respected the fact that you came from a position of ‘authority’ regarding rugby skills and rules and responded well to your instruction. ”

“ The warm-up games which included Rippa tags introduced them to ways in which to tear the tags as well as evasive measures to protect them from getting ripped. ”

“ Delivered non-contact sessions to the girls with the support and guidance of the teachers. ”

TOP OVERALL ACTIVATOR PROGRAMME LEARNINGS

Narrow Scope

Through the activator programme, Unions were able to provide large numbers of girls of a wide range of ages an opportunity to try rugby. The mass delivery enabled relationship building and insights into more non-traditional ways of delivering rugby to girls. Using these learnings Unions can now narrow their scope and be strategic about delivery and more specific about who they deliver to. This involves using regional participation data, insights, and the voice of participants to deliver a more targeted intervention for recruitment or retention.

Ensure there are relevant next steps

Providing young people with a trial experience is great, but they need to know how they can continue to play. Future offerings need to be well-connected to their local club or school and be relevant to their current confidence and competence. A jump from 'trying out rugby' to tackle rugby or season-length commitments may be a step too large for some girls and this is an important consideration when planning 'next steps'.

Consistent insights

While activation numbers were captured well, participant insights and retention of groups were captured inconsistently across each Union, making it hard to capture overall impact and learnings. Moving forward NZR will create a central monitoring process to ensure we capture impact and share learnings from the ongoing process, players, and evolution of the programme, to continuously evolve our approach to meet the needs of girls in rugby.

More structure

The activator programme has been delivered through a decentralised model, which allows autonomy of design and delivery in each Union. Based upon the shared learnings, and participant feedback we now can provide coordinated training for activators and co-develop an activator tool kit. Both the training and toolkit will enable girls across the country to receive a more consistent experience, and avoid local activators needing to 'reinvent the wheel'.

NEXT STEPS

Programme sustainability

Using the learnings from the programme, NZR is working with Provincial Unions to build action plans that align with the New Zealand Women and Girls in Rugby System Strategy, creating a more holistic approach to the development of women and girls' rugby. Within the action plans Provincial Unions can continue the implementation of the activator programme as a tool to grow the game. The future planning of the activator programme in each Union is built around the key learnings of the project and tailored to the local need and aspirations of the region, and well complemented and supported by a wider plan for women and girls.

Activator training

Utilising the learnings from the activator programme so far, there is a desire from Unions to have a combined development session for activators. This will ensure some consistency in design and delivery, and create a well-connected network of activators across the country. This session will be supported by a Girl's Activator Tool kit.

Participation and competition framework guidelines

To ensure girls introduced to the game through the activator programme are offered appropriate next steps to learn and play there is an identified need for clarity on relevant offerings and pathways for women and girls.

NZR will collaboratively design guidance on offerings that meet the needs of girls based on their age, stage, and skill level to ensure they can seamlessly learn, play, compete, and achieve their aspirations. The guidance will provide clarity to unions, clubs and schools to work towards sustainable best practice offerings for girls that can be regionally adapted to suit local context.

Development of a 'contact ready' programme for girls

While the activator programme provides introductory opportunities for girls, their next step is to enter the Small Blacks development model and depending on their age, they will miss learning the skills needed to participate in tackle rugby. For girls to safely transition into tackle rugby we need to provide girls and young women with an 'on-ramping' programme that provides a bridge (on-ramp) to contact rugby. This programme seeks to build player confidence and competence in contact rugby to support injury prevention and enhanced experiences. The programme will be supported by guidelines, coach development, and supporting brand collateral.

